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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MUSCAT 000138

SIPDIS

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, G/TIP, AND DRL
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR FOR JAMES RUDE

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KCRM](#) [KWMN](#) [SMIG](#) [ELAB](#) [KMPI](#) [MU](#)

SUBJECT: PROSTITUTION IN OMAN

REF: MUSCAT 43

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Contacts suggest that prostitution, particularly among women working in massage parlors and dance clubs, is a growing problem in Oman. The Royal Oman Police (ROP) has arrested and deported women for engaging in prostitution, but the government has not prosecuted to date any alleged brothel owners or recruiters for facilitating the sex trade. The government claims that there is no evidence of human trafficking among prostitutes; however, contacts in foreign missions tell poloff that some of their nationals have been subjected to sexual exploitation. End summary.

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Background
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¶2. (C) Prostitution is a taboo topic in Oman, and the government rarely provides official information on prostitution or related issues. The lack of information makes it exceedingly difficult to gauge the actual size or nature of the commercial sex trade in Oman. Contacts among expatriates and non-official Omanis tell poloff, however, that commercial sexual transactions are occurring in hotels, bars, brothels, and in some massage parlors and health clubs that increasingly have appeared in certain cities in Oman in recent years. The majority of women allegedly involved in the sex trade are from China, Morocco, Eastern Europe, India and South Asia. There also are some Omani prostitutes, contacts say; veiled Arab women reportedly often demand a higher price on the market.

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Prostitution as Choice?
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¶3. (C) While a few government officials privately admit that commercial sexual transactions take place, they contend that prostitution does not pose a major criminal or social problem. Assistant Attorney General for Technical Affairs, Mohammad Darwish al-Shidi, told poloff that the Public Prosecutor initiated only 24 prostitution cases in 2006, many of which the government eventually dropped for lack of evidence. Most of the cases were against individual women, the majority of whom were registered as maids, he said, who had "chosen" to engage in prostitution as a way to increase their monthly income. Al-Shidi said that there has been no evidence to date to suggest that criminal networks are running prostitution rings or that women are the victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation. If there had been such evidence, he stated, the government would have charged those responsible under

Articles 220-222 of the Penal Code, which assign a prison sentence of up to five years for those found guilty of forcing a women to have sex with a third party or earning a living off of her prostitution. Finally, he opined, if there had been strong evidence of trafficking, the Public Prosecutor would have handled the case as one of enslavement under Article 260, which carries a prison sentence of up to 15 years.

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Claims of Exploitation
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14. (C) Diplomats from some labor exporting countries tell poloff that some of their nationals have claimed to be victims of forced prostitution and sexual exploitation. These women's claims of abuse, however, rarely result in formal charges against their pimps or employers, the diplomats say. Suhod Sinsuat, Administrative Officer and Attache (protect) in charge of assistance to Philippine nationals, told poloff of a 2006 case in which a woman who was working legally in Oman as a maid claimed that a man abducted her from in front of her sponsor's house and forced her to work as a prostitute in a Muscat brothel. The woman finally ran away to the embassy's safe house and recounted that she had been forced to have sex with clients seven to eight times per day for five Omani Riyals (USD 13) per encounter. The women further claimed that the owner of the brothel never paid her. Sinsuat said that the Philippine Embassy reported the woman's story to the ROP, which investigated the claim, detained the brothel managers and eventually closed down the brothel. However, Sinsuat declared that the ROP never formally arrested the managers or owners of the brothel, and that the government did not

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pursue the charges against them for their activities. As the case languished, the Philippine Embassy eventually repatriated the woman, and the Omani government dropped charges because the claimant had left the country.

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Alleged Exploitation in Massage Parlors...
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15. (C) Diplomats in other foreign missions also have informed poloff of claims of sexual exploitation, particularly among some women who work as masseuses in health clubs and as dancers in hotel bars, which many contacts claim may act as fronts for prostitution. Naddaphong Lathapipat (protect), a consular and welfare officer in the Embassy of Thailand in Muscat, estimated that during 2007, an average of two Thai women per week sought shelter at the Thai Embassy's safe house, each with similar stories of abuse. The women, he said, claimed that recruitment agencies in Thailand had promised them jobs in clinics or tourist resorts as masseuses with good salaries. They then traveled to Oman as tourists with the promise that their Omani employers would get them a work visa once they were in country. The women reported that their prospective employers - both Omani and expatriate - generally met them at the airport and took their passports, but never changed their visa classification to allow them to work legally.

16. (C) The Thai women claimed that their employers and customers used the women's illegal status as a way to force them into sex, Lathapipat related, which customers regularly expected during a massage session. If the women tried to refuse, the customer or employer would remind the women of their illegal status and threaten to turn them into the police if they did not comply. Lathapipat also said that some women reported being physically confined to the massage parlors, often forced to work - providing both massages and sex - without pay or time off.

¶7. (C) According to Lathapipat, the ROP has taken action against some of these establishments, after which it generally informs his embassy if there are Thai nationals involved. For example, he said, in early December 2007 the ROP raided and closed two massage parlors for prostitution - one in the southern city of Salalah and another in Nizwa in Oman's interior. During the operation, in which officers posed as paying customers, Lathapipat said that the ROP arrested four Thai women for engaging in prostitution and violating Oman's labor laws by working without an employment visa. The ROP detained the Thai women, as well as a number of women from Morocco, Russia and China, for one week before deporting them in mid-December. Lathapipat noted that according to his information, neither the owners nor the managers of the massage parlor were prosecuted.

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...and Dance Clubs
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¶8. (SBU) Contacts say that women who come to Oman to dance in hotel bars may find themselves in similarly exploitative situations. Many hotels in Oman - particularly those rated at three stars and below - have one or more bars associated with them, a sizable number of which feature women (often grouped by ethnic or national origin) dancing on a raised platform. Customers in many of these establishments reportedly can indicate their interest in a particular dancer and pay a bar employee to have the woman focus her attention on them while she dances.

¶9. (C) According to a contact who claims to have spoken with multiple women who are working as dancers in these bars, the process by which these women enter the country makes them particularly vulnerable to abuse. In many cases, he said, a recruiter in their country of origin can pay the women as much as 1,000 OR (USD 2,600) up-front to work as a dancer in Oman. However, the women have to repay this amount to their employers through their earnings, which they receive by capturing the attention of the bar's customers. These women reportedly receive as little as 150 beza (USD .40) of each riyal (USD 2.60) that a customer pays to have them direct their dancing towards him. They often work from 9:00 pm to 3:00 am on weekdays and an expanded schedule on weekends. The contact said that in some instances, the women asserted that their employers lock them in houses until the next day's performance, and that some employers use their leverage to force the dancers

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into prostitution.

¶10. (C) A Moroccan diplomat told poloff that the ROP will inform him on occasion that it has detained Moroccan nationals in Oman as dancers on charges of prostitution and illegal work. He said that most of these women, whom the ROP generally deports after a short period of detention, entered Oman on tourist visas or under a special three-month renewable visa for members of dancing or musical groups. These visas, he said, are approved by the Ministry of Tourism and do not require the petitioning hotel or bar owner to obtain a work permit from the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). Their defacto status as unregistered workers places the women outside the system of complaint adjudication and legal redress that the MOM and Oman's 2003 Labor Law can provide. These women may end up working and living in the country illegally when their visa expires, the Moroccan diplomat said, which makes them particularly vulnerable - like the women in massage parlors - to becoming victims of sexual exploitation.

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Imprecise Estimates
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¶11. (C) All of the diplomats with whom poloff spoke estimated that the number of victims among their nationals in Oman likely is small. They admitted, however, that their missions do not know how many of their female nationals may be in country at any given time, let alone how many of them are possible TIP victims. Many of the women working in dance and massage establishments do not register with their respective embassies upon their arrival, the diplomats complained. The Moroccan diplomat, for example, asserted that he did not have statistics regarding how many Moroccan women enter Oman under the dance troupe visa every year. Further, despite stories of abuse, his government had yet to approach Oman's Ministry of Tourism to get these statistics or discuss the process by which the Ministry issues these visas. The diplomats also declared that some of their nationals enter Oman illegally. A Chinese diplomat told poloff, for instance, that there have been cases in which local agents brought Chinese women into Oman via the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with false visas and travel documents to work in businesses advertising traditional Chinese therapeutic massage. In several specific cases, he said, the women were deported on charges of prostitution.

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Comment
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¶12. (C) The government of Oman asserts that it soon will pass an anti-trafficking law that provides a national committee with the mandate to establish a comprehensive program to combat human trafficking (reftel). The stories of prostitution in Oman raise a number of issues that this committee could address, including: researching possible links between prostitution and trafficking; and investigating why the ROP and Public Prosecutor have failed to pursue cases against brothel owners and those who facilitate the sex trade. (Note: According to the draft anti-TIP law, the Ministry of Tourism is not represented on the national committee, which could complicate research into how tourist promotion and services may contribute to trafficking. End note.) The committee might also work with labor exporting countries to develop strategies to screen foreign workers who may be headed for jobs with known links to prostitution.

¶13. (C) Given the government's reticence to deal with the roots of prostitution in Oman, such an agenda will likely take time to develop. However, a Ministry of Health official seconded to UNICEF told poloff that the Ministry has applied for money from the United Nation's World AIDS Fund to conduct a sex workers survey in Oman. While the Ministry's primary focus is on stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS in a high-risk population, the study would be the first official recognition that prostitution exists, and could help provide a platform for dealing with it. End comment.

GRAPPO